Dangerous Constancy

——John Donne's "The Indifferent"

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In some of his love poems in *Songs and Sonnets* (1633), John Donne deals with the theme of lovers' constancy. In most of these poems, however, the relation of the lovers lacks completion, and further, a lack of a sense of balance can be observed, in other words, the lovers do not harmonize with each other. This is not simply because of Donne's conceit of tactics to make fun of love relations, but also because it was a time of confusion of ideas. Since Copernicus, the human beings are caught up in a sense of having lost their existence. Thomas Docherty explains this situation well: "With the Copernican revolution in astronomical thought, there occurs a fundamental 'displacement' of the Earth and of the privileged position accorded humanity. Centrality and stable certainty are lost, and the human now finds herself or himself in a condition of 'exile' or 'error', like an erring or wandering star in the universe".[1] The Earth itself is now in error, or wandering condition, and naturally human beings dwelling on the Earth are in the same condition.[2] They are placed squarely in the controversy between "the quest for stable certitudes and knowledge" and "instable uncertainties", and this is the theme that dominated the poetic imagination of the age.[3] Donne is no exception to this domination, and the situation of men and women in Donne's poems represents the problem between certainty and uncertainty.

1 Thomas Docherty, *John Donne Undone* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 8.
2 *ibid.*, p. 18.
3 *ibid.*, p. 23.

Some narrators in these poems desire their mistress' constancy.[4] In "The Indifferent", however, the situation is reversed, or more, the virtue of constancy is even despised. In the last stanza of this poem, Venus, the goddess of love appears; she hears the narrator's complaint about his mistress, and after examining herself the relationship between men and women on Earth, says:

> ...Alas, some two or three
> Poor heretics in love there be,
> Which think to 'stablish dangerous constancy.[5]
> (*ll.* 23–25)

She is surprised and dismayed to learn that they restrict each other for the sake of constancy. The virtue of constancy is denied here in Venus' idea of love: this is not the natural relation between lovers, and therefore it would establish a "dangerous" constancy. Why does Venus think constancy is dangerous? Here, Donne's ironical view on love is expressed: the more he opposes against the love relation based on constancy, the more revealed it is that he still complains women's inconstancy as the narrator of "Woman's Constancy" does. As Colie states, however, libertinism is an effective means to address to readers the serious argument.[6] While the title itself shows aparadox, the paradox should play the important role in "The Indifferent". In addition to it, Donne's opinion wavers between the tradi-

4 For example,in "Woman's Constancy", the mistress does not look like the same woman of the night before, and she implies that their vows of the previous night were made a long time ago, so long ago that she hardly remembers them. This is a typical poem of Donne on the theme of a mistress being inconstant in order to be true to herself, and of a man deploring it.

5 Quotations of Donne's poems follow Arthur L. Clements ed., *John Donne's Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1992).

6 Rosalie L. Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1966), p.105.

tional and progressive thoughts of those days throughout *Song and Sonnets,*[7] but by explaining the paradox of dangerous constancy, this poem will make his way of thinking clear. Using a metaphor of love, in "The Indifferent", he plainly weighs the respective values of mobility and instability: he appears as a revolutionary and progressive thinker of his age.

The narrator in "The Indifferent" is enjoying love affairs with various kinds of women, seeming to follow Venus' words "love's sweetest part, variety" (*l.* 20), while the mistress does not allow herself to have another lover. In the first stanza, the narrator expresses his ability to be in love with women of various, even contradictory types:

> I can love both fair and brown,
> Her whom abundance melts, and her whom want betrays,
> Her who loves loneness best, and her whom masks and plays,
> Her whom the country formed, and whom the town,
> Her who believes, and her who tries,
> Her who still weeps with spongy eyes,
> And her who is dry cork, and never cries,
> I can love her, and her, and you, and you,
> I can love any, so she be not true.
>
> (*ll.* 1–9)

He cares nothing for their individual appearance, morality, personality or class. In this stanza, we find that Donne does not at all follow the Petrarchan tradition of love poems. Petrarchism signifies the description of "the power of a lady's glances, her angelic purity,

7 In order to determine Donne's attitudes toward the new movement of thought of those days, it is helpful to note that Donne's mind was divided between two extremes : to "favor and disapprove of the New Science, believe in tolerance and lash out at Jesuits ...". See Deborah Aldrich Larson, *John Donne and Twentieth-Century Criticism* (London and Tronto: Associated University Presses, 1989), pp. 136–137.

her dazzling beauty, and the anguish of unfulfilled desire, the struggle set up in the poet's soul between admiration of her purity and the desire to possess her because of her physical beauty"; and her beauty and virtue are expressed with metaphors or conceits such as "eyes as blue as the sky and sparkling like diamonds".[8] The first line of "The Indifferent" shows that Donne refuses to follow Petrarchan tradition: that the narrator "can love both fair and brown" means that he has impartial tastes regarding his mistresses' physical beauty.[9] A woman who is "fair" is blonde and typical of Petrarchan beauty, but a woman who is "brown" is considered not only ugly, but also morally foul.[10] Like the "dark lady" in Shakespeare's sonnets, Donne portrays a female figure of anti-Petrarchan tradition, and this indicates that Donne's interest does not originate in the mistress' appearence. "Both" of the first line is effective throughout this stanza. These contrasts show that the narrator is capable of loving not only completely different types of women, but also women placed between the two extremes.

The second stanza focuses the mistress' faithfulness.

Will no other vice content you?
Will it not serve your turn to do as did your mother?

8 Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan eds., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1993), p. 902.

9 John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 131–132. Carey examines Donne's lack of describing the physical beauty of women, comparing his with the poems of Traherne. In his opinion, this is not "deficiency in Donne just the result of a wish to write clever, paradoxical poetry which will gather some of its eclat from disparaging what other people have conventionally taken pleasure in". In a poem such as "The Undertaking or Platonic Love", this tendency can also be seen: true virtue is hidden within a person's skin and is not to be judged by his/her appearance; in this poem Donne's interest does not lie in the superficial beauty of a woman.

10 For example, in his Sonnet 130, Shakespeare reverses Petrarchan metaphors, and this is effective in showing the poet's intent to be funny. See Stephen Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 453–454.

Or have you all old vices spent, and now would find out others?
Or doth a fear, that men are true, torment you?
Oh we are not, be not you so;
Let me, and do you, twenty know.
(*ll.* 10–14)

Here, faithfulness is no longer a virtue. For the narrator, it signifies a narrow-mindedness which keeps him from enjoying his affairs. The first four lines express his impatience: (1) she will not allow any vice other than constancy; she is too cautious and never takes love's risks, (2) although women in all times have freely enjoyed affairs, she would neither learn from them nor change her mind, (3) she has already examined all the vices that faithful women are most likely to do, and she looks like finding new ones to bind him to her. The vices these women preserve might be gentleness, sincerity, motherhood, and so on. The man who is unrestricted in love will hate these vices when he finds them in the woman he loves. On the woman's part, when she wants to enjoy amorous affairs, any one of these vices will prevent her from taking pleasure in love. She must be dry, or should not have passion, in order not to arouse any attachment in men's hearts, (4) if the mistress were inclined to look for pleasure, but found her lover to be true, she would not have enjoyed the affair. However, the narrator assures her that this will never happen, and demands that she be as free as men are, and even encourages her to love as many men as possible.

The last three lines of this stanza show the narrator's sense of crisis regarding his mistress' constancy, and contain the essence of his philosophy of love relations:

Rob me, but bind me not, and let me go.
Must I, who came to travail thorough you,
Grow your fixed subject, because you are true?
(*ll.* 16–18)

"Rob me" is, in some versions of the text, read "rack me" or "reach me". Theodore Redpath remarks that "reach me" offers a better image than the other two. He takes "reach" as "seize" in the obsolete sense. "Seize me" or "hold me", in his argument, shows the narrator's wish to have "an intense but not protracted or faithful relationship", while "rack me" or "torture me" does not fit the context, and "rob me" is vague.[11] In my opinion, however, "rob me", meaning "rack me", provides a clear image that a love affair is a robbery. In the case of a real robbery, the robber attacks a victim, binds him/her, and never lets him/her go unharmed. However, the narrator of this poem seems to be willingly robbed: he truly wants to hand over everything the robber (his mistress) demands except his faithfulness, as if he were a person who is willing to be raped and will not denounce his assailant. He wants their relations kept purely physical, so he is far from comfortable if his mistress "holds" or "seizes" him: he wants to enjoy affairs without any restrictions.

In his *Paradoxes,* Donne defends women's inconstancy.[12] According to him, women's inconstancy can be compared with every work of nature: as "the *Stars* move, the *Moon* changeth; *Fire* whirleth, *Aire* flyeth, *Water* ebbes ..." so women change their minds. This runs counter to the conventional opinion, but it has been a popular argument of the Stoics to defend the "weaker sex" setting her up in a moralistically higher position than she actually occupies.[13] Donne uses this parodox as a parody in "Defense of Women's Inconstancy"; women are suitable to be discussed through paradox. Of course, men also have a natural tendency to change as their minds lead them; that is to say, inconstancy is one of the in-

11 Theodore Redpath ed., *The Songs and Sonets of John Donne* (London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 304–305.

12 Charles M. Coffin ed., *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne* (New York: The Modern Library, 1994), pp. 280–282.

13 Colie, pp.102–103.

herent characteristics of human beings.[14] In contrast to this, immutability, in other words, constancy leads to stagnation as "Gold that lyeth still, rusteth; Water, corrupteth; Aire that moveth not, poysoneth". Human beings as a part of nature change, so it is inappropriate that women are disparaged for their inconstancy. Moreover, to avoid poisoning it is necessary to accept the nature of mutability. Mutability is indispensable because it keeps human beings fresh.

The narrator of "The Indifferent" expresses his meeting with his mistress as "to travail (i.e. travel)", which means that he passes from one woman to another as he likes.[15] A metaphor of mutability exists in the caprice of his behaviour. When the narrator travels from one woman to another, his movement is necessary to serve the purpose of mutability. In other words, to know a variety of women is the natural behaviour of a lover, and is essential to love relations. Without movement, he cannnot follow Venus' urging of "variety", which is what Venus recommends:

> Venus heard me sigh this song,
> And by love's sweetest part, variety, she swore,
> She heard not this till now; and that it should be so no more.
> (*ll.* 19–21)

14 According to Carey, at the end of the 16th century, change was a popular theme but it reflects a pessimistic view of the period. But Donne's interest in change was personal and rather a part of himself; his apostasy from Roman Catholicism to Anglicanism is an instance of a general unfixedness. See Carey, pp. 167–168.

15 In *OED,* "travail" means to exert oneself, labour, toil, work hard; of a woman: to suffer the pain of childbirth; and travel. According to it, three interpretations can be possible on the phrase I quoted: (1) I came to you only to labour and be distressed by you; (2) I was born through you (a woman); (3) I came to you to travel on you. In order to make clear the image of inconstancy, I take the third one in this essay. And Redpath reads "travail" as "travel" in his textbook (See Redpath, p. 135).

Venus clearly opposes fixedness. That the narrator and his mistress stop moving and become stagnant is against nature and must be avoided. It is only natural that Venus, the goddess of love, should encourage them to have fresh relationship rather than stagnant and poisoned one, and in this poem the narrator is her loyal follower.

According to the poem, when the narrator stops travelling, he will be his mistress' "fixed subject". This means a master-servant relationship will exist between the two lovers, that is, he will be possessed by his mistress as a slave or a manservant.

In this poem, the man refuses to be the fixed subject of the woman, but this does not simply suggest that it is unendurable for a man to be dominated by a certain woman. That a woman rejects a man's domination can be a possible interpretation of Donne's other poems dealing with narrators denouncing women's inconstancy. In fact, there are some examples which show narrators attempting to dominate their mistresses in order to manipulate them. In "Lovers Infiniteness", the narrator claims his right to own his mistress: "The ground, thy heart, is mine (*l.* 21)", and in "Community", he takes it for granted that a man uses a woman:

> But since she (nature) did them (women) so create,
> That we may neither love, nor hate,
> Only this rests: All, all may use.
> (*ll.* 10–12)

Even in poems describing perfect relations between two lovers, such as "The Sun Rising", the relation of possessor-possessed can be seen: "She's all states, and all princes I (*l.* 21)". This phrase means that princes or kings conquer states of lands, although, of course, their conquest is premised on the existence of the land and it is not

the land but the people that they really conquer.[16]

Docherty says that ruling a woman is for a man "the status of object in the 'nature' or ideology constructed by masculinism",[17] and is "acknowledged as an element which is instrumental in providing an identity for their 'owners' of manipulators, men".[18] Here, the theme of the man-possessor, the woman-possessed, is easily recognized, and this can be, in Janel Mueller's words, "the arrogance of a man who thinks his woman his property".[19] The vagueness brought about by inconstancy, and the flirtatiousness of the female nature make a man's control difficult.

The difficulty of controling a woman arouses in a man a sense of crisis, and this phenomenon is closely related of the reigns of Mary I and Elizabeth I in Renaissance England. Because of Edward VI's early death, Henry VIII's daughters, Mary and Elizabeth, succeeded to the throne. This led to a confusion of social values regarding men's superiority to women, and as for Elizabeth's reign, controversies arouse regarding her queenship. This debate continued throughout her reign; it dealt with not only "issue of sex and gender but also because of its bearing on other topics ranging from the royal succession to ecclesiastical policy to theories of sovereignty".[20] In other words, her queenship shakes both political and religious systems from the foundation. Jon Knox was one of them who took

16 Janel Mueller, "Women among the Metaphysicals: A Case, Mostly, of Being Donne for", in Arthur F. Marotti ed., *Critical Essays on John Doone* (New York: G. K. Hall & Co, 1994), p. 42. She takes this line as an example that "the lyrics of reciprocated love also inscribe at key points the prevailing asymmetry of outlook and sexual role that casts the male as the persuader and possessor, the female as the persuaded and the possessed".

17 Docherty, p. 62.

18 *ibid.*, p. 69.

19 Mueller, p. 40.

20 Dennis Moore, "Dutifully Defending Elizabeth: Lord Henry Howard and the Question of Queenship", in Carole Levin and Patricia A. Sullican eds., *Political Rhetoric, Power, and Renaissance Women* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 114.

part in this theoretical debate as against women's rule, saying female rule is "blasphemous against God".[21]

It is possible to read Donne's reaction to, and opinion about this question in his poetry: that is, he, like Knox, did not accept women's rule. Guibbory points out that "Donne's anti-Petrarchanism, his debasement of women, his various subversions of women's rule, and his repeated attempts to reassert masculine sovereignty embody both the problematics of male submission to a female ruler and Donne's not unrelated personal sense that male desire requires an element of conflict, a feeling of superiority and the promise of mastery".[22] The repeated patterns, in *Songs and Sonnets,* of being betrayed by a woman whom the narrator tries to dominate and of barely escaping from a woman's control over him coincide with the characteristics Guibbory describes. It can be said that Donne was basically conservative rather than progressive, insisted on traditional sex roles and was disturbed by social change. "Dangerous constancy", then, in this point of view, may be depicted as a warning that women's domination would overthrow the social order.

That the narrator of "The Indifferent" obeys Venus is, however, imcompatible with the preceding riew; female dominance is not the target of attack in this poem. It is Venus who gives humans the freedom to love, and this freedom is based on variety. And, as seen in *Paradoxes,* variety is as natural in human beings as the movement of nature; therefore, a denial of variety means defying the laws of nature. The style of relations between men and women is reexaminined in this poem. It can be read as even pursuing women's emancipation as far as the concept of equality between a man and a woman. A man's inconstancy is approved, and moreover, its "naturalness" is supported using exaggerations in order to prove that incon-

21 Carole Levin and Patricia A. Sullivan, "Politics, Women's Voices, and the Renaissance: Questions and Context", *ibid.,* p. 1.

22 Achsah Guibbory, ""Oh, let mee not serve so": The Politics of Love in Donne's *Elegies",* in *Critical Essays on John Donne,* pp. 31–32.

stancy is the very essence of humans, not only of women but also of men. The condition stated above is how humans *should* live, and is the ideal world of love ruled over by Venus.

"Change" approves of seeking the new, but on the other hand being restricted and therefore stagnant should be avoided. Though Donne was basically conservative, he surely felt the movement of the age and recognized the necessity for reform. No matter which controls over which, the man or the woman, a master-servant relationship exists, and many people persist in clinging to this traditional convention of "dangerous constancy", which leads to the suppression of human nature.